

ON MESSAGES AND "MESSAGE STICKS" EMPLOYED AMONG THE QUEENSLAND ABORIGINES.

Illustrated by Specimens in the Queensland Museum Collections.

BY R. HAMLYN-HARRIS, D.Sc., F.R.A.I., F.L.S., ETC.

NOTHING appears more natural than that primitive people such as the Queensland aborigines, having an individual or tribal message to deliver, should convey such by means of a definite token, as a guarantee of good faith, both of the message and the sender; and that such a token should be marked to assist the messenger in the delivery of his message.

On account of the distance which such messengers would on occasions have to travel, "memory sticks" would become almost a necessity, and there is, I think, little doubt that certain marks are undoubtedly known and recognised by tribal customs, so that, however many meaningless marks such a token might contain, there are nevertheless certain signs which would always be readily understood. Such tokens or so-called "message sticks," however, would not be used merely as "memory sticks" but for other definite purposes, such as, for instance, a summons to an individual or group of individuals (for either private or public reasons) to attend an initiation ceremony or to settle a dispute, or for general purposes of corroboree. Sometimes a "message stick" is purely an introduction, and at other times may serve as a passport through hostile country.

The same token has on occasions a totemic significance, especially when carried in conjunction with the bull-roarer. The fact that a "message stick" is often retained until the arrival of the sender almost suggests a possibility of its being regarded as a temporary "keepsake."

It is necessary at the outset to realise one important fact, and that is that these "sticks" must not be interpreted as a white man's letter would be, nor must it be supposed that the "sticks" could "talk" in a white man's language. A native boy would emphasize this by saying that the black boys "were notha kind," and that the boys make them to send "alonga notha man." To suppose that a "message stick" could be interpreted from the white man's standpoint is ridiculed even by the blacks themselves, any one of whom might

be induced to exclaim "that fella humbug, ear'nt mak'em talk all a same white man"; and this is, I think, one of the most important points in the consideration of our Queensland "message sticks."

Nothing is more natural, either, than even among primitive folk a love message should be delivered by means of a love token, and when such is the case it is noticeable that such a symbol is not accompanied as a rule by any particular set of marks; the "beautiful nonsense" which every lover so highly appreciates is left undoubtedly to the imagination, unless it might be that we can discern in certain "flash" marks, sometimes so noticeable, something of the sender's emotion. It must be exceedingly difficult for the white man to understand the proper significance of the "message stick" from the black man's standpoint, and it is because an endeavour to explain the "message stick" from our own has so often been made, that we have been at a loss to understand the subject properly.

Most authors are agreed that the marked "message sticks" tell no particular story nor indeed have any specific meaning, hence the opinion on this subject of a man like R. J. Cooper, of Melville Island (who was also Baldwin Spencer's informant), is of the greatest possible value. Cooper in this connection says:—

"There are very few used on Melville Island. Some people say that the blacks on receiving them can read or understand the marks on the stick, but that is not my experience. Anyone entrusted with a 'message stick' is told the message and the different meaning of the marks. Sometimes sticks are sent and no message is told to the bearer, that is in the case of sweethearts, &c. I have heard them read them; one mark may mean 'him want 'em,' and then another one, a growl, and another mark 'him want 'em me go bush'; and then another person may get a stick differently marked altogether and the same meaning applied, and *vice versa*. I have received 'message sticks' personally, but always the bearer has told me what is wanted, and the stick explains itself, each notch denoting some definite article required; and the stick is simply sent to prove that the message is true, and is kept to refer to later when the sender is met with."

It is, however, hardly likely that such marked sticks would have originally come into existence if there had not been some definite intention of their conveying some precise meaning, and viewed in this light they are undoubtedly the first primitive step towards a written language. The idea of an aid to memory is nothing new. Deniker in his "Races of Man" (6) gives a number of very interesting instances of the use of symbolic objects and mnemonic marks, such as for instance the little horn tablets bearing notches which have been found in the sepulchral caverns of the Quaternary period, at Aurignac (Dordogne).

Of great importance to our subject is the record of Harmand (11) discovered in a Laotian village in the shape of a notched tablet, each notch of which had a definite significance.

But one of the most important uses to which "message sticks" would be put would be that for the purpose of obtaining barter, when there would be a tendency for the stick to become marked in the same way and in the same definite positions on each occasion, and hence such would be purely "memory sticks," and it would be easy to imagine that some definite meaning might be attributable to each notch, not that such a notch would be capable of being characterised by an exact interpretation, but merely that such a mark would tend to remind the messenger of the definite object of his mission, and if he was sent on a similar mission again, it is not outside the bounds of possibility that there would be a tendency to mark the stick in exactly the same way: hence the message stick is not an attempt at writing but a crude representation of ideas. Doubtless the brand of individuality would also be noticeable in the shape of some "flash" marks irrespective of meaning.

The idea that "message sticks" are really primarily "memory sticks" and guarantees of good faith is, I think, shown by the fact that when carried they are never wrapped up, as it is evidently the intention that same should be available at a moment's notice. In Queensland they are carried by men only, and whilst hunting they are usually twisted into the hair and concealed therein; unless the messenger happens to have a belt, in which case the stick might be placed there for a time.

"Message sticks" seem to have been in use almost universally throughout Australia with the exception of the Arunta tribe of Central Australia (7, 24), and though never regarded as sacred it was nevertheless considered to be a matter of honour to see that they safely reached their destination, and the faithfulness with which such a mission was carried out shows clearly how (prior to the advent of civilisation) the native regarded the sanctity of his obligations.

There is an instance known to me personally where the messenger died *en route* at some distance from his destination. After some short lapse of time the stick was passed on from one to the other most religiously, until it finally reached its proper channel. It is presumed that no verbal message could have accompanied the stick, since the messenger died with him, and yet I have evidence that the receiver was able to decipher the message in some sort of way, since he immediately became troubled and soon after "went bush," returning to the tribe and place from whence the message was originally sent.

Tasmania.—The primitive Tasmanians did not possess "message sticks"; their only method of intercommunication was by means of smoke signals made in prearranged places and principally used to give warning.

New Zealand.—Nor do we find "message sticks" in use among the Maoris. J. F. Cheeseman, the Director of the Auckland Museum, sends me the following note:—

"The nearest approach that has come under my notice is a little article in this Museum, which is the lower valve of an oyster shell, through which a circular hole has been neatly drilled. I was informed that such articles were sometimes sent as a proof of the honesty and reliability of anyone sent with an important message, but I have been unable to find sufficient support for the statement in other districts to allow me to fully accept it at present. With respect to credentials sent with a message, I believe one plan was to send a well-known Mere (fighting club of nephrite) or other weapon or ornament as a token of the bona-fides of the messenger."

Southern Africa.—The present Governor of Queensland, Sir Hamilton Goold-Adams, who has spent a considerable time in parts of South Africa, has kindly given me the following information bearing on this subject, which I find far too interesting to omit. He says:—

"The tribes and kingdoms of Southern Africa are very much more important organizations than anything of the kind in Australia appears to be, and when a message is to be sent from one chief or king to another it is conveyed by ambassadors with due ceremonial. When written messages are carried by the natives in the ordinary course of trade, business, &c., the procedure is as follows:—As soon as the message is handed to the carrier he immediately goes to the nearest bush and cuts therefrom a small twig, in the cleft end of which he inserts the note, and there ties it securely with bark. He then sets out, carrying the stick in front of him so that it may be apparent to all that he is the bearer of a message. Should he find it impossible for him to complete the journey, he proceeds to the nearest chief, informs him of his mission, and the message is invariably sent on by another bearer. Very often, of course, there is delay in securing another messenger, but it is a recognised thing amongst native tribes that the message must be forwarded, and it eventually does reach its destination."

With reference to messages and messengers of Torres Strait, I have the following information:—

Yorke Island.—Kindly supplied by Ed. B. Connolly—

"1. When a native went to the bush in his own island, or to an adjacent island, he left a pointed stick at his house with the point in the direction he had taken.

"2. If he was sending a message to someone on another island that he intended paying him a visit in, say, five days' time, he would send five sticks pointed at one end.

"3. If he wanted a person on another island to visit him he would send sticks pointed at both ends.

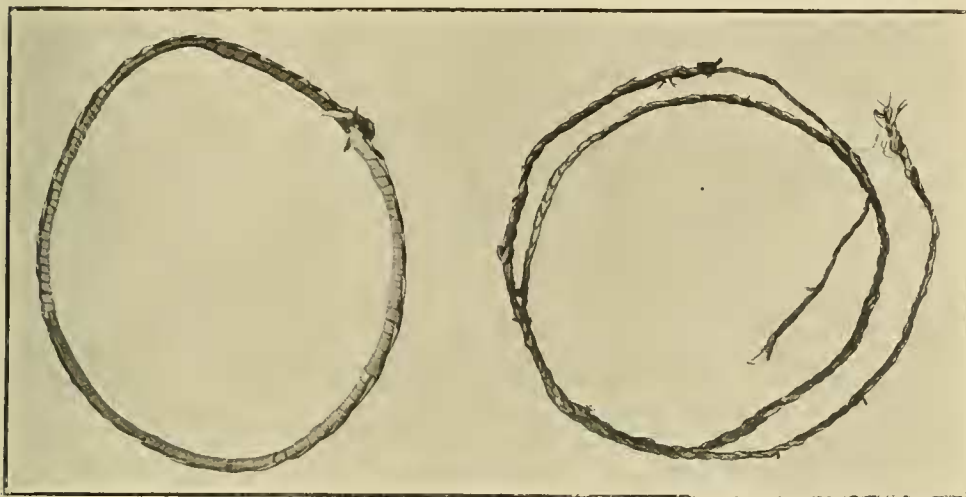
"4. If natives of one island intended to make war on another island in, say, ten days' time, they sent ten sticks burned at one end.

"5. If natives were approaching another island with peaceful intentions, they would wave a green branch, but if with warlike ones, a firestick."

Badu.—E. M. Zahel kindly writes as follows:—

“ In sending messages to another island a relative was chosen if possible, and in the case of love messages a female relative. If it were a message asking the friend or people to come over to the island a piece of plaited cabbage-tree was sent; if there were need for haste a very short piece, and if not, a piece longer, according to the urgency of the case.

“ In the case of a young man wishing to take a girl from another island he would send a female relative, when possible, and would give her his anklet and armlet. If the girl were willing she would wear these; if not, they would be returned by the messenger. Sometimes the girl, when willing, would send her anklet and armlet in exchange. The man would also send a message as to when to expect him to come and fetch the girl. The days were numbered by the fingers up to two hands and then the numbering repeated.”



Text-figure 1.

Fig. A, Anklet. Fig. B, Armlet. "Tiapuru."

“The anklet and armlet are called 'Tiapuru' (also recorded by A. C. Haddon (10)), and when sent as a love message 'Musura.' The piece of cabbage-tree used to denote time is called 'Buruwa.'

“ In sending the news of a death to another island the man who has been the master of ceremonies at the funeral was chosen. He was called a 'Marget,' he would take a stick, which was evidently a special stick and only used on these occasions—the only way they seemed to have used a stick for messages—and when the people of the island were assembled and sitting down, he would go next to the chief friend of the deceased and push the stick into the ground, at the same time asking if so-and-so (mentioning the name of the deceased) were there. The people would immediately know he was dead and start to wail. This custom was practised at Badu last month. A girl had died very unexpectedly in Thursday Island, and her brother brought the news over to the father. The boy went to the father and asked him if the girl was with him. The father knew at once that she was dead.”

The Murray Group.—I am indebted to J. S. Bruce for the following information:—

“The Murray Group, Daruley, and Stephens Island people speak the same language and their native customs are similar. They had a kind of message stick which they used among themselves. It was named ‘Tom,’ and was arrow-pointed but had no barb fixed on its point.

“A messenger coming from Murray to either of the above islands or *vice versa*, with a verbal message was given a ‘Tom’ by the sender to present as his credential. There was no distinguishing mark on the ‘Tom’ to show who the sender was, but on presentation it was accepted in good faith as genuine. The bearer of the message would address the receiver, ‘Your friend so-and-so sends his “Tom” to you.’ It was not returned, neither was a ‘Tom’ sent with the return message. Messages accompanied by a ‘Tom’ were used principally by the sender in giving notice of his intention to pay a friendly visit to his friends, stating about the time they might expect him, or inviting a friend to come on a visit to him. The ‘Tom’ was also used in sending a challenge to fight, with the warning as to the time when the attack was likely to be made. The last occasion on which it was used for this purpose was about forty years ago, when a messenger from Murray with a ‘Tom’ was sent to Stephens Island warning the people there that they were to be attacked at a certain time. The trouble arose through the Stephens Islanders having forced a young Murray woman (whilst she and her father were visitors there) to marry one of their men. The father got a message sent to Murray telling what had been done, and his friends arranged to punish the Stephens Islanders and sent a message to them accompanied with a ‘Tom.’ Formerly the people of the above islands traded with the people of the Fly River, Papua. The old people tell me that they received the ‘Tom’ with a verbal message from Papua just in the same way as they themselves used it—*i.e.*, in giving notice of an intended visit.

“No message or ‘Tom’ was used between the peoples of the Eastern and Western Islands, as they had no intercourse with each other until recent times, but they had a form of ‘Tom’ in use amongst themselves.”

South Australia, bordering S. W. Queensland.—In this connection I cannot refrain from making some reference to the Thdoas in use among the Diari tribe of Cooper’s Creek:—

“When members of this tribe (and, I believe, the Wonkangura adjoining them on the north) intended to strike camp in order to find a better hunting-ground or more water, &c., they made a Thdoa, which was usually of wood (frequently *Acacia ancura*) on which they painted a design. To this they added a few leaves or twigs at the top, or they moulded a shape of clay or gypsum, and so on, on to the wood, and sticking the pointed end into the ground, usually inside one of their huts, left it there, for any relation or friend who might chance to come after they had left. The finder knew how to read the signs. Thus, for instance, a waterhole called Kapitakutu (or Kudu) was shown roughly representing a kapita or handieoot, by which their friends knew that they had gone to the particular waterhole bearing that name.

“Or take another instance. A Thdoa decorated with a tuft of emu feathers, on a white knob represented the place Warukatipitipahu. ‘Warukati’ is the Diari for the emu; ‘piti’ means the hinder parts, and ‘palu’ white. Or, again, Kirrakirani. ‘Kira’ is the name for a boomerang and the diminutive is usually formed by duplication, the ‘ni’ at the end denoting ‘to’ or ‘in the direction of.’ On the top of this Thdoa two or three fishbones are fixed, to tell their friends that they have gone to this particular waterhole for the purpose of fishing, and that usually implies only a temporary absence from camp.”

¹ On the authority of H. J. Hillier.

TECHNIQUE.

The kind of wood used is not of any particular significance, since it would probably be selected for its accommodating size. It is interesting to note that amongst the Queensland Museum specimens the following woods have been used:—Leichhardt pine, white pine, cypress pine, gums of various kinds, blackwood, ironbark, &c.² *Hibiscus brachysiphonius* or some other soft wood is used in the Gulf district (Hey); whereas Roth informs us that some such wood as gidyea or tea-tree is frequently used in North-West Central Queensland, and that the name for the message stick among the Kalkadoon simply means "a piece of wood." In the neighbourhood of Dunk Island, so Banfield tells me, "the natives used no particular wood, though they had a preference for wattle, especially that which was reddish in colour." As a rule the sticks remain plain, the use of ochre seeming to be a modern invention, at least so it would appear from the study of the Queensland Museum specimens; the older variety were rarely if ever ochred, but the more recent the stick, the more ochre has been daubed on it. This, it seems, is also E. J. Banfield's opinion, who says—"I have no information as to ochres on message sticks, except during current times when it is sought to catch the eyes of collectors; in such cases a white clay, a soft red rock, and a yellowish earth are used with water. I thought that perhaps coral lime might be employed, but I am told not."

In pre-white days the wood was cut with a stone implement used somewhat as a saw. The process would of course be slow, but, as we know, time with the native was of no object. The piece of wood once secured was scraped down with shell or stone scrapers. For polishing and obtaining fine edges the sticks were rubbed together until the desired end was obtained.

In some cases Banfield tells me that the leaves of *Ficus opposita* were used for polishing, but ordinarily the shells made the stick smooth enough.

QUEENSLAND MESSAGE STICKS.



Text-figure 2.

The obverse and reverse sides of a message stick from the Burdekin River, Queensland.

(No. 970; 140 mm. x 17 mm.)

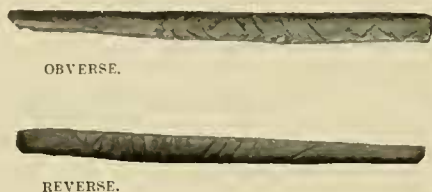
² No specific names of these can be given.

This stick is made of ironbark and has 37 notches on each side. Both surfaces are marked with extreme care, the small hole having been made with either shell or stone drills.

On the obverse side three club shields are well defined, with a varying number of short double marks over each shield.

On the reverse, there are three boomerangs with one double mark inside each boomerang.

Message unknown.

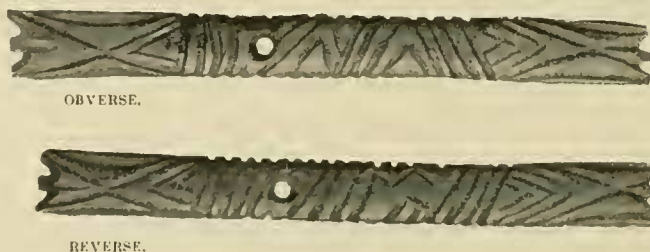


Text-figure 3.

Obverse and reverse sides of Queensland message stick.

(No. Q.E. 16/871; 115 mm. x 6 mm. x 8 mm.; exact locality unknown.)

This stick, made of ironbark, has zigzag lines on the side of top corner, but not one line completely encircles it; there is an isolated diamond-shaped figure in centre of the obverse side. Message unknown.



Text-figure 4.

The obverse and reverse sides of a message stick from the Barcoo.

(No. 261 (1808); 171 mm. x 19 mm. x 7 mm.)

This stick, which is made of ironbark, suggests totemic designs similar to those used on the bodies of initiates, in cave-drawings (as well as the markings associated with burial in New South Wales). The lines and notches are moderately deep, and the hole has been drilled with a firestick. The notches are in sets of 3, 4, and 7, and 2, 1, and 5 on sides respectively. Message unknown.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 5.

The obverse and reverse sides of a Queensland message stick.
(No. Q.E. 16/870; 131 mm. x 10 mm.; locality unknown.)

A roughly fashioned and untrimmed stick made of ironbark, containing a message with reference to a long journey. The flat obverse side only contains a long sinuous line and a very short one, together with one notch on the side of the same. On the reverse there are a number of irregularly placed lines producing in the manner of their arrangement a roughly carved diamond-shaped figure, so characteristic of message sticks.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 6.

Two sides of a Southern Queensland message stick.
(No. 972; 119 mm. x 14 mm.)

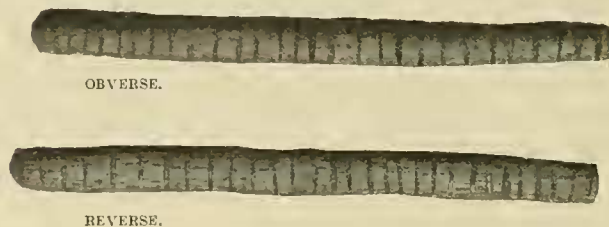
This stick is an exceptionally interesting one, and is made of the white gum which grows along watercourses, but is not actually round; it is distinctly marked, and the peculiar diamond-shaped figures with a centre cut (one with two) have undoubted phallic significance, and is the only stick of this kind which has come into our possession.

There are altogether 10 representations of the vulva indicating the number of females to be operated upon at the ceremony, and about 35 straight lines denoting the men, the isolated grouping indicating the number of eligibles from each locality.

**Text-figure 7.**

Two views of a bean-shaped Queensland message stick made of pine.
(No. 2811; 55 mm. x 15 to 21 mm.)

Further information unobtainable.

**Text-figure 8.**

Obverse and reverse sides of a typical message stick from Roseburth, Birdsville.
(No. Q.E. 14/356; 162 mm. x 14 mm.)

This stick is very roughly fashioned of pine wood, possesses no notches but only transverse lines cut on each side. Another specimen from the same locality is very similar, except that here and there there is a greater distance between each cut.

**Text-figure 9.**

A rare form of message stick from the Gregory River District. (A. Meston.)
(190 mm. x 15 mm.; native name "Muranda.")

This interesting stick is made of the wood of the bean-tree, and its whole surface is marked with a faintly incised pattern heterogeneous to a great extent.

The work has been accomplished with a marsupial incisor, and is extremely faint in places. The obverse side shows two notches at that portion of the stick,

where the message is reputed to commence. At the other extreme end there is a small ring in the centre of a blank, and a distinct "track" is visible extending over half the length of the stick; diamond-shaped or irregular triangular figures predominate.

Its message is reputed to be somewhat as follows:—The bearer of the message is sent with another man for two gins (two notches: first notch, single virgin; second notch, widow would suffice), and intimates a big fight which is to take place as a display of dexterity (not tribal fight). Nine wommeras represented by diamonds, and six spears by lines, are sent together with relatives of girls in payment for the two gins.

The track indicates the distance to be traversed.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 10.

A message stick from Normanton, North Queensland.

(No. 971; 131 mm. x 11 mm.)

This stick is encompassed by winding lines, the interstices being filled with short cross-bars, the cuts of which are now and then broad. The surface has been charcoaled.



OBVERSE.



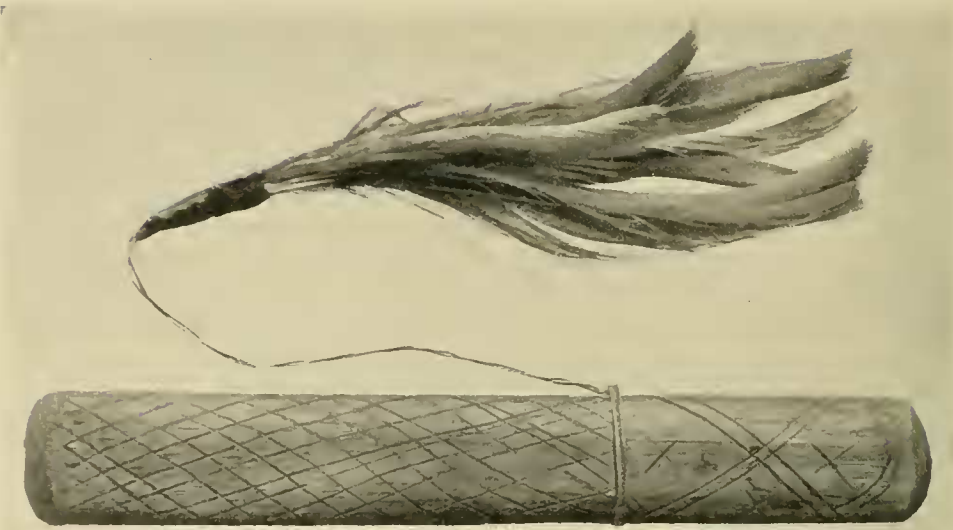
REVERSE.

Text-figure 11.

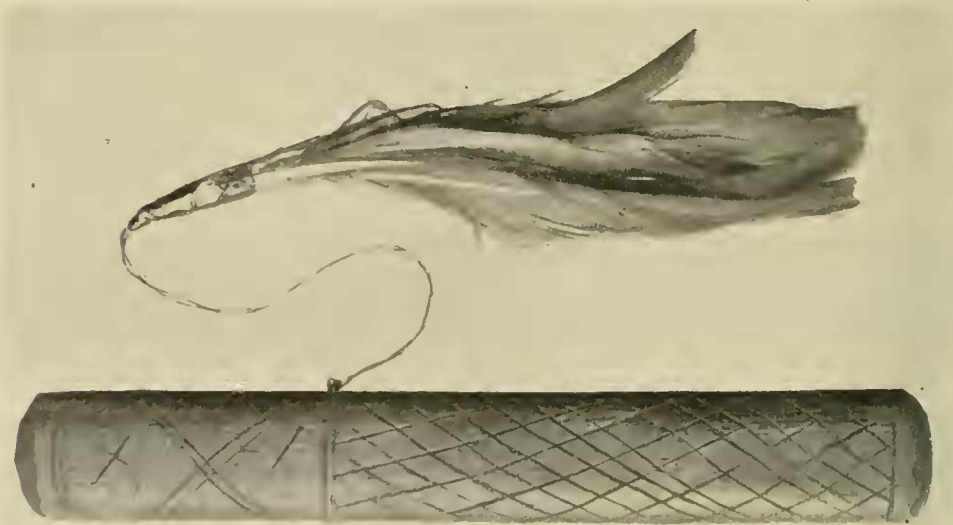
A rather long message stick from Bourke River.

(No. 2123; 317 mm. x 33 mm. in widest part.)

The wood used for this stick is extremely soft, and white clay has been smeared over a portion of the surface only. Crude boomerangs are marked upon the reverse side.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 12.

A message stick ornamented with feathers, from Turn-off Lagoon, *via* Burketown, North Queensland.

(No. Q.E. 11/36; 196 mm. x 24 mm.)

This stick, which was donated by a Protector of Aborigines, Mr. E. P. Smith, N.E. inland of Burketown, is provided with a plume of yellow-crested cockatoo feathers mounted in gum cement. A stick of this kind, almost a rarity, would only be used by the headman of a tribe in communicating with the headman of another, and as soon as received the plumes would be taken off the stick and worn in the hair, pending the arrival of the ceremony to which he had been summoned.

The lines, half-circles, and crosses (of which there are six altogether) are but lightly carved on a piece of white gum, and the whole is raddled in dark ochre. Such a message stick might on occasions be wrapped up in a piece of bark.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 13.

A message stick from Turn-off Lagoon, *viâ* Burketown.
(No. Q.E. 11/35; 125 mm. x 20 mm.)

This pine stick has an unusual design and is highly suggestive of white influence. The three figures on the obverse side almost suggest a flag design with six dots, but this must not be taken too seriously, since the writer is totally unaware of the motive in design. Mr. E. P. Smith informs me that the stick was sent from a brother to his sister telling her that he had found the police.

Although the arrow here is undoubtedly intended to portray the "arm of the law," it should not be entirely overlooked that there was a time when a similar mark resembling the arrow was in use and had other significance (probably phallie from what I have been told).



OBVERSE.



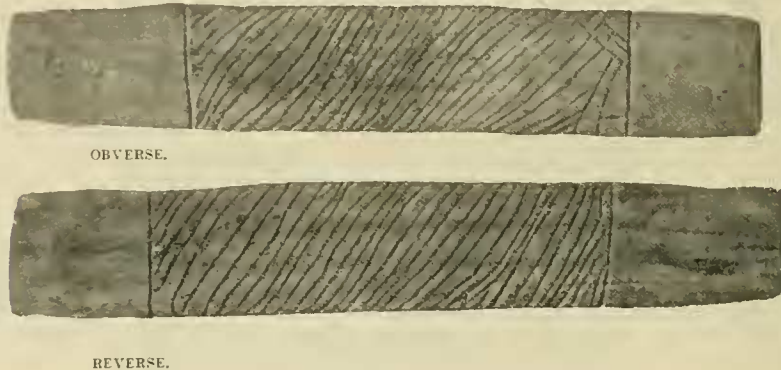
REVERSE.

Text-figure 14.

A four-sided pine message stick from Turn-off Lagoon, *viâ* Burketown.
(No. Q.E. 11/36/2; 92 mm. x 11 mm. x 8 mm.)

This ochred stick contains irregularly inclined zigzag lines on the reverse, and the period of six moons is shown by six straight lines on the side, unfortunately not visible in the illustration.

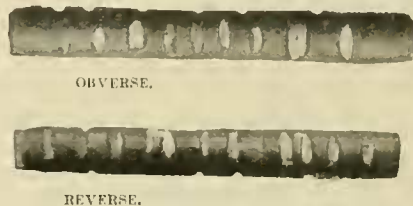
The stick, which is of recent make, is an invitation from one clan to another to visit a corroboree in six months' (moons) time.



Text-figure 15.

A flat (white gum) message stick from Turn-off Lagoon.
(No. Q.E. 11/34; 182 mm. x 32 mm.)

A stick at one time the property of the "King of the Muholoon." The close sinuous lines completely encircle the confined area. The cross-markings shown on the obverse side are produced where these taper off. Message unknown.



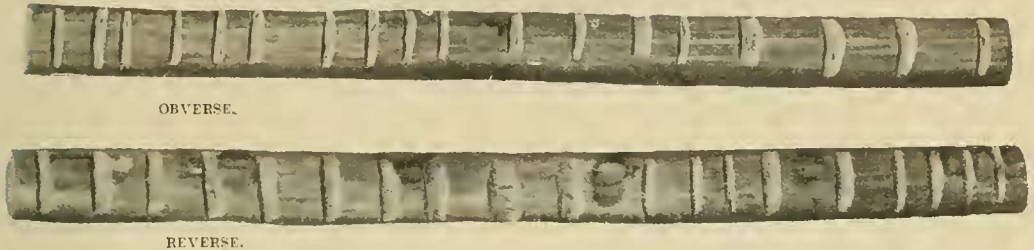
Text-figure 16.

Message stick from the Cape York Peninsula.
(No. Q.E. 14/530; 109 mm. x 14 mm.)

This message stick was sent by a native of Aurukun to a native of Weipa, consenting to his sister marrying the latter when he had built his humpy, and asking for payment in the form of a cloth from the woman and a pair of trousers and a singlet from the man.

The wood used is possibly a variety of Hibiscus, and is crudely prepared, showing haste in the making. There are altogether three rows of notches cut

at irregular intervals. Although the natives who used this stick have been under the influence of civilisation, it is nevertheless a concrete instance of a definite message.



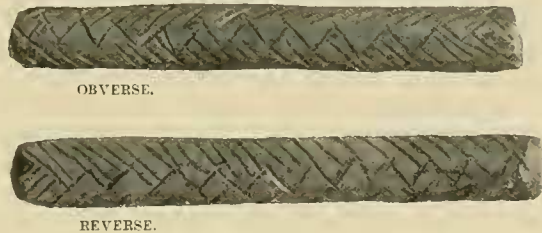
Text-figure 17.

A message stick, as seen on the two marked surfaces, from the Cape York Peninsula.

(No. Q.E. 14/532; 242 mm. x 19 mm.)

It is not an easy matter to determine the kind of wood from which this stick has been made. It is not at all unlikely that it may be a piece of *Hibiscus brachysiphonius*, which is recorded by Hey as being used in the Gulf districts for this purpose. Being, however, desirous of procuring an expert opinion, I consulted Mr. C. T. White, the Colonial Botanist, who says—"It seems like one of the Euphorbiaceæ or Urticaceæ. The medullary rays are pronounced, close together, and sub-equidistant, and under a lens the pores are prominent and distinct; the soft pith occupying the centre is a marked feature. No distinct rings of growth could be observed. Though a light wood in cross section it shows little or no soft tissue."

The stick has a number of "square cuts" and a few "back" cuts which are distinct and are evidently intended to convey a meaning of their own. The two surfaces between the rows of marks are ochred in red. Message unknown.



Text-figure 18.

A "Cypress" pine message stick from Herbert River.
(No. 390 (S426); 129 mm. x 16 mm.; donor, J. Gaggin.)

This round stick is covered with zigzag lines (in groups) irregularly placed. Message unknown.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 19.

A pine message stick from the Herbert River, Queensland.
(No. 391; 89 mm. x 9 mm.; donor, J. Gaggin.)

This stick, though in the main round, has practically four sides and is raddled with a dark-red ochre. The two rows of notches number 24 and 25 respectively, and a groove (track) runs along one of these rows; for the rest zigzag lines and crosses are typical. Message unknown.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 20.

A Central Queensland message stick.
(No. 969; 154 mm. x 12 to 15 mm.)

A stick of so-called "grey" gum with zigzag lines, lightly engraved, producing on account of their position a rather confused picture; the diamond-shaped figures have consequently too uncertain contours. Message unknown.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 21.

Message stick from Camboon.
(No. 311 (x); 157 mm. x 19 mm.)

This stick, made of ironbark, is cylindrical in shape, is provided with winding decussating grooves. Both on the obverse and reverse sides a distinct

double track is noticeable—which could hardly be interpreted as flash marks. The message is unknown.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 22.

Two sides of a message stick from Camboon.
(No. 312; 193 mm. x 21 mm.)

This stick is made of an ironbark, and its surfaces are engraved with faint lines, more pronounced on the obverse side. Message unknown.

**Text-figure 23.**

A North Queensland message stick,
(No. Q.E. 16/895; 114 mm. x 13 mm.)

This stick, made of a species of pine wood, had actually been used four years ago by a native in sending the following message to his brother-in-law from Cooktown to Cairns, when the donor, Mr. J. J. Bramford (Oaklands), procured it.

“ You tell 'em, come three moon. I been see 'em. White fella steala me my country, shoot 'em brother alonga boat. Tell 'em Samson; which way Charlie? Tell 'em come. Mother alonga me die. Mother first time, die. Bye-bye me tell 'em. Toby alonga me.”³

Altogether there is apparently no special technical design from the study of which we could classify the various Queensland sticks and determine with any degree of certainty the localities from which they came. It is nevertheless

³ Interpreted into intelligent English this would read somewhat as follows:—

“ My brother-in-law, I want you to leave home in three months. I would like you to come and see me here. A white man stole me from home and shot my brother in a boat. Tell old Samson I'm here. Where is Charlie? If you see him tell him to come too. My mother and old granny have both died. Cannot tell you more now. Toby is with me.”

an acknowledged fact that the native can generally tell whether a stick belongs to "his country" or not, and is, I fancy, an indication that there was a time, probably not so very remote, when there was a greater persistency of type in definite districts.

We have a number of other message sticks in our collections, but these being of quite modern manufacture are not of much importance; they are made mostly of a very light wood and are ochred in red. They contain a whole host of marks evidently worked in according to the fertile imagination of the maker, and I should say were only made for trade purposes or in some cases by special request, and can therefore not be said to have any real ethnological value. The markings consist mostly of a series of narrow lines encircling the stick, and in some instances crossing and re-crossing one another; in one specimen, Q.E. 16/931, a crescent-shaped figure is evidently intended to represent the sun, with lines radiating from it. This stick measures 191 mm. x 17 mm., and comes from Barketown (donor, J. N. MacIntyre).

Two sticks referred to and figured by Banfield (1) (Q.E. 16/897 and Q.E. 16, 898), are also in our collection.

Northern Territory—



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 24.

A message stick from the Northern Territory.
(No. Q.E. 15/193; 112 mm. x 13 mm. x 10 mm.)

This stick was obtained by Bishop White (when Bishop of Carpentaria) on the Daly waters, and donated by him to the Queensland Museum. Its interest lies in the fact that, just as the Bishop was leaving Darwin by coach, an aboriginal boy brought this stick to the driver and asked him to deliver it to another blackboy at Daly waters with this message:

"Want 'em pretty fellow alonga head, boomerang."

Bishop White was so interested in the matter that he undertook to deliver the stick, but withheld the verbal message until he had satisfied himself that the receiver of the message had some knowledge of what the stick was

supposed to convey. Bishop White said he was no little surprised to find that the boy interpreted the request for head-bands and boomerangs correctly.

Since the accuracy of this instance is vouched for by the integrity of such a well-known cleric, we may also presume that the stick probably contained some mention of an exchange and the name of the boy by whom it had been sent.

The stick is made of pine and has 22 and 23 notches respectively on each side; for the rest, crosses and a few bars complete the writing.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 25.

A small pine message stick from the Northern Territory.
(No. Q.E. 11/16/1; 70 mm. x 13 mm.)

Evidently a hastily prepared and crudely fashioned stick from the Roper River, collected by Mr. M. J. Colelough in 1909. It was sent in connection with the death of a child, notifying the father of its death.

There is a custom in this part of the country of passing children temporarily on from one tribe to another, in good seasons, with a view to educating them and teaching them local dialects. Such a child had died, and hence the message.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 26.

Message stick from the MacArthur River, Northern Territory.
(No. Q.E. 11/16/2; 167 mm. x varying from 14 to 21 mm.; ochred.)

This contains an invitation to the Boroloola to a ceremony, "Jundee," and records the number of boys to be initiated. This stick is made of Leichhardt

pine; the lines are cut deeply and irregularly. The obverse surface is convex, and has a number of zigzag with four deeply cut lines in the centre, and on the side fifteen notches. The reverse surface is flat.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 27.

A very roughly made pine message stick from Mountain Creek, Northern Territory.
(No. E. 11/16/4; 115 mm. x 14 mm. Collected by Mr. M. J. Colelough.)

Message unknown.



OBVERSE.



REVERSE.

Text-figure 28.

A message stick from the Northern Territory (Roper River).
(No. E. 11/16/3; 181 mm. x 17 mm. Collected by Mr. M. J. Colelough.)

A definite message accompanied this stick, together with three war-spears, specially made and very straight. The message was something to this effect:— A brother sends warning to his brother (by a third person) about a coming foe, who had set out to spear him owing to a fight over a lubra, and who was approaching by a given route. Owing to the wet season and the fact that the whole country was in flood ("big fella wata") it would take four moons to cover the journey.

The stick, which is made of Leichhardt pine, is covered with significant marks. On the obverse side the flood-waters are indicated by a deep gash, whilst the four moons are enclosed in a circle by themselves. On the reverse three lines evidently refer to the three spears which accompanied the messenger. For the remainder, the zigzags with their number and variety cover the surface of the stick with the exception of the two ends, which are unmarked.



Text-figure 29.—A West Australian message stick from the Flora Valley district, 20 miles from Hall's Creek, Kimberley Division. (No. E. 16/703; 274 mm. x 12 mm. maximum.)

This stick was obtained by Mr. W. A. Chambers, who was stationed at Wyndham. It was said to be tabu to women. I am, however, inclined to dispute this statement, and beyond placing the remark on record I should hesitate to accept it until such a statement has been definitely confirmed.

There are three sinuous (unbroken) lines winding from end to end, reaching to within about one inch of each end. These are interspersed by animal tracks heading in opposite directions. Message unknown.

Western Australia.—I am greatly indebted to Mr. L. Glauert, of the Perth Museum, for his notes on Western Australian message sticks, and as they are of value to the student I reproduce the greater part of them here.

“The distribution, as illustrated in the Perth Museum collections, is from Kimberley to Shark's Bay and inland to the Upper Gascoyne, Wilma, and the country around Menzies and Davyhurst.

“In the National Museum, Melbourne, are specimens from Northampton near Geraldton, York and Esperance Bay on the South-east Coast.

“In shape the object is usually cylindrical, with pointed, rounded, or truncated ends. The length varies from 4½ to 27¼ inches, and the thickness from $\frac{5}{16}$ to 2½ inches.

“Three specimens, oval in section, connect these message sticks with the ‘marben’ or passports figured by Clement¹ and the ‘eugina’ or ‘gilliana’ or invitation stick of the same writer. These churinga-like objects, used by men and women of the North-west and Kimberley as charms and head ornaments, are usually termed ‘Lara’ by the blacks of the neighbourhood of Broome. At the same time it must be noted that a police constable, recently returned from Peuder Bay, Dampier Land, near Broome, informed me that these ‘cobba-cobba sticks’ were used to summon aboriginals to attend cobba-cobbas or corroborees. In connection with this matter I have no further particulars except the statement by Dr. H. Klaatsch to the effect that message sticks were unknown in the Broome country, so far as he was able to ascertain (4).

“*The Technique.*—A suitable piece of wood having been obtained, the surface was smoothed and the design executed in scratches produced by a sharp object such as a chip of stone, piece of shell, broken bone. As a rule the markings are fine and hairlike, but a type from the Gascoyne, Ashburton, and Kimberley (2?) (C. 263, 364, 694, 697, 710) is ornamented with grooves which are both wide and deep. Often the design is accentuated by a ‘shading’ of dots or transverse cuts and by the rubbing in of some black material, probably black earth or a mixture of charcoal and fat, which fills the scratches.

“On several specimens from the Kookyun district, the pattern has been burned in by applying heated iron wire, a method which has superseded the original practice of using glowing twigs or embers.

¹ Austral. Assoc. Adv. Se., vol. xi, Adelaide Meeting 1907, p. 580.

“ The *design* traced upon the message stick is varied in the extreme. It may follow some definite plan or consist of a number of figures of irregular outline with little or no trace of any recognisable plan. As is usually the case with Western Australian aboriginal art, representations of natural objects such as trees, plants, animals, birds, and man are absent; the only exceptions are message sticks of the type figured in the British Museum Handbook, to the ethnographical collections upon which human beings, plants, and snakes (?) are depicted.

“ Practically all the designs may be classed as geometrical, closely allied to the conventional patterns met with on certain types of shields, spear-throwers, bull-roarers, and eluringas of Western Australia.

“ In describing and classifying the patterns I have commenced with those designs that most closely resemble a conventional type, and have endeavoured to show how the various schemes adopted are related to this and to one another.

“ The regular pattern, a duplicated longitudinal zigzag, is not uncommon on objects made by Western Australian aborigines; it is present on several message sticks, C. 345 West Kimberley, 3829 from the Isdell Ranges, West Kimberley, &c.; by the rounding of the angles the line may become sinuous as in C. 709 from the Gascoyne River and C. 346 from West Kimberley. Subsidiary markings in the form of groups of short transverse scratches similar to the ornamentation on certain types of wooden spears are present on some of these message sticks from the Kookyrui district, the Upper Gascoyne River 5454, the Ashburton River 4028 and Walina, Lake Way 2537.

“ By altering the relative position of the two lines they are in some instances made to enclose lozenge-shaped areas which are brought into greater prominence through being covered with numerous short transverse cuts or scratches. This variety is not uncommon in the Kookyrui district, where some specimens have been collected having the pattern burnt in, not incised.

“ Another variety may be termed the ‘Banksia-leaf’ pattern. This is a modification of the regular zigzag, produced by the introduction of a long individual band between the zigzags. The distribution of this pattern appears to be confined to the north-west of Western Australia (Pilbara district, &c.), the eight specimens in the collection having been obtained at Welma and Bernier Island. Those from the latter locality were made by the natives from the Ashburton and Lyons River. There are also message sticks with the ‘Banksia-leaf’ pattern arranged transversely on the stick instead of longitudinally.

“ The transitional forms between these more or less regular designs and those in which no order can be recognised are naturally very varied. They are well illustrated by a series from Kookyrui.

“ Specimens without any trace of regular arrangement have been obtained from the Gascoyne, Ashburton, and various unknown localities. Included among these are designs similar to those figured in the British Museum Handbook. Four examples of these are present in the collection; one came from the Gascoyne, the others are without data.

“ A type which may have evolved from the above main group of duplicated zigzags is represented by specimens from the Gascoyne, Ashburton, and Kimberley (?). Here the zigzags have been modified to form a number of adjacent angular figures. The outlines and shading consist of deeply incised grooves into which black earth or charcoal has been rubbed. The six specimens ornamented in this manner were collected more than twenty years ago and are undoubtedly genuine.

" Finally there is a small series of three examples from Wilima and the Upper Gascoyne, quite distinct from the varieties described above. The sticks are longitudinally grooved like a throwing-stick ('dowark' or 'coondie'). All three are ornamented with bands or fine scratches passing transversely round the stick at each tapering end; the one has no other markings, but the other (4019), from the Upper Gascoyne, is covered with thin scratches throughout its whole length. The third specimen, from Wilima, is similar, but with the longitudinal grooves, which in this case are much shallower, almost obliterated by a superimposed design or zigzag lines extending from end to end. Numbers of short transverse scratches less than $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in length, in groups of from two to seven, are present wherever the principal design permits.

" The number of specimens in Western Australian Museum collections totals 63."

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